

Enhancing instructional leadership: Lessons from the NSW Literacy and Numeracy Action Plan



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Abstract

Over the past decade, schools, school systems and governments at all levels have invested heavily in enhancing the quality of school leadership. The Australian Government-funded National Partnerships (2012–14) identified principal leadership as one of its explicit goals. More recently, the emphasis of leadership development has been on enhancing instructional leadership.

This paper describes the approach to enhancing instructional leadership adopted by the New South Wales government school sector as part of the NSW Literacy and Numeracy Action Plan (2012–16). The three school sectors in New South Wales each adopted different models for their implementation of the Action Plan according to their differing contexts. The Action Plan's implementation in the government sector (where it was known as Early Action for Success) had as its centrepiece the appointment of dedicated instructional leaders to the 310 most disadvantaged schools in the state. The role of the instructional leaders was to build the capacity of teachers to deliver high-quality pedagogy through focused in-school professional learning. Drawing on the findings of a five-year evaluation of the Action Plan, this paper describes how the instructional leaders undertook their roles; the factors that influenced the success of the role; and instructional leaders' impact to date on schools, teachers and student learning.

Introduction

Over the past decade, schools, school systems and governments at all levels have invested heavily in enhancing the quality of school leadership. The Australian Government-funded National Partnerships (2012–14), for example, identified principal leadership as one of its explicit goals (Erebus International, 2012). More recently, the emphasis of leadership development has been on enhancing instructional leadership, drawing on a range of research by authors including Dempster et al. (2012), Timperley (2011), Robinson (2007) and Sharratt and Fullan (2012).

The evidence that the quality of instructional leadership in a school can make a significant difference to student learning outcomes is compelling. Principals have the second-biggest in-school impact on student outcomes, after classroom teaching. An extensive review of the evidence (Centre for Educational Statistics and Evaluation, 2015) concluded that leadership explains about one-quarter of the total difference in student outcomes explained by all school-level variables (once student intake and background factors are controlled), whereas classroom factors explain around one-third.

Interest in instructional leadership as an area of academic research has its roots in the early school effectiveness literature (e.g. Edmonds, 1979). This research, and much that followed, focused on the role of the principal in providing strong direction and a vision for the school as one of the apparent correlates of effective schools. This focus, which was criticised in later years for its narrowness of perspective, was subsequently redefined to encompass a broader view of leadership as a distributed activity and with greater emphasis on leadership of learning than on school

management for its own sake (e.g. Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004; Hallinger, 2009).

The definition of 'instructional leadership' remains contested. Several authors have proposed frameworks of activities or strategies that characterise instructional leadership. Hattie (2015), for example, describes the work of instructional leaders as follows:

Instructional leaders focus more on students. They look to the teachers' and the school's impact on student learning and instructional issues. They conduct classroom observations, ensure professional development that enhances student learning, communicate high expectations and ensure that the school environment is conducive to learning.

This paper describes an approach to enhancing instructional leadership adopted as part of the NSW Literacy and Numeracy Action Plan (2012–16) by the government school sector, where it was known as Early Action for Success. The centrepiece of the Early Action for Success was the appointment of dedicated instructional leaders to the 310 most socio-educationally disadvantaged schools in the state. The role of the instructional leaders was to build the capacity of teachers to deliver high-quality pedagogy through focused in-school professional learning. Drawing on the findings of a five-year evaluation of the Action Plan (Erebus International, 2017), this paper describes how instructional leaders have undertaken their roles and the factors that have influenced their success.

The Action Plan

Through the Action Plan, the New South Wales Government progressively allocated \$261 million to meet the needs of some 41 392 Foundation to Year 2 (F–2)

students in 448 targeted schools in 2012–16. Targeted schools were provided resourcing to:

- support the explicit assessment of the learning needs of students, especially on entry to Foundation
- provide classroom-based professional development for teachers in personalised learning and diagnostic assessment
- adopt the use of a three-tiered response to intervention for those children who need special attention
- focus on whole-school instructional leadership, including the appointment of instructional leaders for literacy and numeracy within the government school system and equivalent positions in the Catholic school sector.

The role of instructional leaders in Early Action for Success

Instructional leaders were generally appointed at deputy principal level and were accorded senior leadership status in their new schools. However, they were usually relieved from normal operational responsibilities to focus exclusively on developing the quality of teaching and learning in F–2 literacy and numeracy.

Most of the instructional leaders (85% in 2016) were appointed from outside their current schools, with the intention that they would bring fresh eyes to analysis of school performance and challenge current practices from an objective point of view. While this arrangement had some advantages, it also had implications for the pace of change possible and the kinds of skills required by the new instructional leaders. For example, it took considerable time for the appointees to achieve acceptance and be perceived as credible in their new school settings (particularly in the early stages of the initiative).

The predominant form of employment of instructional leaders in government schools in 2016 was appointment to a single school. Over the course of the Action Plan (2012–16), a variety of different arrangements were put in place—some for pragmatic reasons, such as the need to accommodate small and geographically isolated schools. Most of the options explored in during the initial stages of the Action Plan had been abandoned by 2016 and were not preferred by principals. Over time, Early Action for Success has developed greater consistency of implementation across schools.

While all instructional leaders had broad responsibility for building F–2 teachers' competence and confidence in teaching literacy and numeracy, their specific roles and responsibilities varied somewhat from school to

school depending on individual school circumstances, and also varied over time as priorities changed and emerging needs were identified.

Instructional leaders played a very hands-on role in providing professional learning within their schools on a group and individual teacher basis; leading discussions about student achievement and implications for teaching and planning practices; and coaching and mentoring school staff. The development of data-gathering, recording, analysis and reporting systems was also a key task, particularly in the early stages of schools' participation in the Action Plan. A typical day for an instructional leader might see them engaging in a variety of tasks, including:

- observing a teacher's lesson and providing feedback
- modelling a particular teaching strategy in a classroom
- observing a teacher working with a small group of students on a diagnostic assessment task and making a judgement about the skills and understanding demonstrated (rated against the cluster levels specified in the New South Wales Department of Education's literacy and numeracy continuums for Foundation to Year 10)
- working with a group of teachers on a year level or stage basis to analyse progress made on a cohort basis, and to identify students at risk along with the appropriate tier level of intervention they may need
- working with a group of teachers to evaluate the success of their teaching programs or specific intervention strategies at a group and individual student level, and helping teachers plan for the next period of teaching
- providing professional learning for whole-school staff on topics of general relevance or specific need in relation to literacy and numeracy teaching and learning, such as how to structure a literacy block and how to engage students in ownership of their learning.

While flexibility of approach was important to accommodate emerging school needs, most instructional leaders developed structures and routines to ensure that they could impact on all classrooms on a regular and timely basis. For example, most adopted or developed templates and pro formas to record their discussions with teachers, actions required, follow-up required and goals to be achieved by the next meeting. This level of documentation was demanding and sometimes confronting for teachers, but it was essential in underscoring the seriousness of purpose of the exercise and the high expectations for improvement in student outcomes. Moreover, it reinforced that this level of scrutiny of practice and accountability for outcomes would not be an add-on to normal practice but rather business as usual from now on.

Meeting the needs of low-performing students

The Action Plan recognised that improving student learning was dependent on the quality of teaching students received, which in turn depended on the teacher's capacity to consistently deliver high-quality lessons targeted at students' individual learning needs. Building teachers' capacity was, therefore, a fundamental focus of the Action Plan. Research conducted by the authors of this paper into educators' perceptions about the outcomes of Early Action for Success revealed that the specific aspects of their role that instructional leaders believed to have contributed to enhanced literacy and numeracy outcomes in their school include establishing effective processes for identifying student needs and for consistent data collection; establishing high expectations; and providing in-class professional learning for teachers. These aspects all figured highly in instructional leaders' perceptions of how their roles had contributed to improved teaching and learning.

Importantly, instructional leaders have been pivotal in facilitating a substantial shift in the locus of delivery of professional learning. In contrast to earlier models of professional development, which consisted mostly of one-off in-service programs selected by individual teachers on the basis of their own interests and conducted away from the school, the predominant model in Action Plan schools by 2016 had shifted to one in which the vast majority of professional learning undertaken in targeted schools related directly to priorities identified within an overall school plan with the aim of directly equipping teachers to address the immediate learning needs of students. In other

words, the most frequent form of professional learning now occurring in the targeted schools is provided by instructional leaders 'at the teacher's elbow'—that is, at the point of need, in the teacher's classroom, and in a naturalistic and interactive rather than didactic manner.

These learning needs have been identified through the enhanced use of diagnostic assessment and student evidence samples as the basis of informed decision-making about teaching and student learning—a further important area developed explicitly as part of the instructional leaders' work. The process by which these needs are identified and, in turn, become the focus of teacher professional learning may be one of the most profound legacies of the Action Plan.

Teaching and learning practices

Table 1 summarises the impact of instructional leaders on a range of school practices in 2016. Instructional leaders believed they had achieved substantial change in the ways in which teachers use student assessment data, not only in terms of the frequency, accuracy and relevance of teachers' assessment practices but also in the ways that the assessment data was used. In addition, instructional leaders reported that assessment practices had become more consistent across classes and year levels, and teachers had become more collaborative in analysing the data as well as more sophisticated in their understanding of the factors contributing to student performance levels and the implications for subsequent teaching practice. Similarly, principals in the vast majority of targeted schools believed that the appointment of instructional leaders had been effective in building teacher capacity; challenging existing teachers' pedagogy; and facilitating

Table 1 Instructional leaders' beliefs about the impact of their activities on their schools (2016)

| Predictor | Percentage of responses |
|---|-------------------------|
| Increased focus on classroom based instructional techniques | 83 |
| Built a stronger culture of evidence based decision-making | 83 |
| Increased emphasis on building teacher capacity | 86 |
| Greater emphasis on assessment of student learning for quality teaching | 83 |
| Greater consistency of teaching within Stage levels | 70 |
| Use of data for tailoring learning experiences for individual students | 86 |
| Use of data for tailoring learning experiences for whole class programming and planning | 82 |
| Engagement of parents in the learning process | 14 |
| Built a more collaborative approach to decision-making | 65 |

staff to make the transition towards evidence-based decision-making in their planning and practice.

The work of the instructional leaders also facilitated:

- greater uptake of the concepts of differentiated teaching and personalised learning
- a more explicit approach to teaching literacy and numeracy
- more frequent opportunities for students to practise key concepts or skills and to receive direct feedback on their progress towards the incremental achievement of their goals, which impacted positively on student engagement during learning
- more specific articulation of the learning intention of a particular lesson or series of lessons, ensuring that students understood the criteria by which they could measure their mastery of the key concepts or skills involved
- stronger emphasis on scaffolding learning so that students better understood the purpose of their learning and the specific reasons why they were undertaking particular activities.

The observations of principals reflected their belief that the Action Plan had contributed to growth in students' engagement in learning, enjoyment of learning and positive attitudes towards literacy and numeracy.

In participating government schools, the percentage of students at or above the expected end-of-year literacy continuum standard had increased in reading by 24 per cent at Foundation level, 27 per cent at Year 1 level and 20 per cent at Year 2 level between 2013 and 2016. In numeracy, the percentage of students at or above the expected end-of-year standard had increased by 14 per cent at Foundation level, 15 per cent at Year 1 level and 16 per cent at Year 2 level.

Lessons to be learned from the Action Plan

The Action Plan experience demonstrated that the appointment of a highly experienced teacher as an instructional leader can have a positive impact on the quality of teaching and learning in early years classrooms, and indeed on the broader culture of teaching and learning in the school as a whole. A number of lessons can be learnt from this experience.

First, success depended on the capacity of the instructional leader to form a positive working relationship with the principal and other school leaders. School systems have a critical role in preparing principals and school staff to take advantage of the appointment of an instructional leader through the provision of clear guidelines, the establishment of strong

expectations and the close monitoring of progress in each participating school.

The attitude of the instructional leader is also paramount. Instructional leaders were more successful when they presented themselves not as an expert who had come to fix the school but as a resource to facilitate change. This same attitude also needed to carry through to ongoing interactions with teachers, in that success was more likely when instructional leaders adopted a style of interaction in which they did not tell teachers what to do but rather posed the questions, 'What do you think needs to be improved?' and 'How might we do this?' Approaches to building teacher capacity that are based on empowerment and recognition of teachers' professionalism were not only more accepted and respected by teachers but also more likely to help embed a sustainable culture of reflective practice.

The focus on data about student performance made possible through the adoption of a common measurement framework (the literacy and numeracy continuums), the emphasis on personalised learning and differentiated teaching and the adoption of a tiered approach to intervention were all essential ingredients in the success of the Action Plan. The instructional leaders provided the 'glue' that helped to integrate each of these elements by supplying the foundational knowledge and the ongoing structures and processes through which the Action Plan was implemented. While the day-to-day activities of individual instructional leaders were determined by the unique needs and context of their school (or schools), the requirements imposed by the Action Plan priorities and the accountability required by the five-weekly reporting of student outcomes and scrutiny of progress by state office staff ensured a high degree of commonality of practice across the schools involved.

An evaluation of the Action Plan by Erebus International (2017) found abundant evidence that the instructional leaders had achieved substantial success not only in changing the culture of the schools targeted but also in changing teachers' understanding of what it means to be an effective teacher. The 'relentless focus on learning'—a term heard frequently in participating schools—promoted by the instructional leaders through formal and informal meetings with teachers, classroom observations and professional learning was credited with greatly increasing the quantity and quality of professional dialogue between teachers; increasing genuinely collegial and collaborative planning as well as sense of collective responsibility for student learning; and providing greater transparency of teaching and decision-making.

As a large-scale reform strategy, the appointment of instructional leaders has proved to be a very cost-

effective approach. The cost of employing instructional leaders, even at deputy principal level, is only marginally more expensive than, say, employing a reading recovery teacher—yet their reach in terms of the number of students impacted and the scope of change facilitated is much greater than that achieved by teachers tasked with implementing a particular program or intervention. The cost of the systemic administration, professional development and coordination of instructional leaders is similarly small compared to the overall cost of the initiative.

Conclusion

The NSW Literacy and Numeracy Action Plan, including the appointment of instructional leaders, was always seen as a long-term strategy for school improvement rather than a quick fix, but also as an integrated means for the simultaneous adoption of a range of practices identified in the literature as contributing to improved student outcomes that would have been difficult to achieve otherwise. From the results thus far in terms of improvement of F–2 students' outcomes as well as the feedback from participants, it can be safely concluded that the experiment was worthwhile. The Action Plan experience therefore provides a useful model for school improvement that could be considered for application elsewhere.

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